

Viewpoints

Have you read anything good lately?

If you are reading this article, you are among the diminishing number of people who read anything they are not required to read.

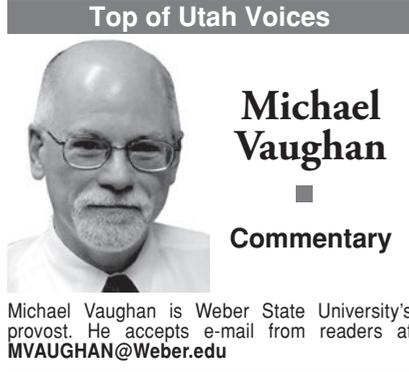
Despite Oprah's Book Club, despite the many fans who read Harry Potter novels, despite the growing popularity of Stephenie Meyer's series of "Twilight" novels, there is considerable evidence that the number of people who read is declining.

Recently, the National Endowment for the Arts released a study that found fewer than half of Americans over 18 read any type of literature. The decline in reading is especially pronounced among young people.

The study reports that 65 percent of first-year college students spend less than an hour each week reading for pleasure. A different survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement, reports that 27 percent of first-year college students have never read a book they were not required to read.

The decline in reading isn't a recent phenomenon. The decline in newspaper readership began in the 1940s. Today, almost half the population does not read any weekday newspaper. Only 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 read a daily paper.

If you think people can



Top of Utah Voices

Michael Vaughan

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Commentary

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adequately compensate for diminished reading by getting their information from television or the Internet, you should consider some facts regarding the state of knowledge among our nation's citizenry. Recent surveys by research groups ranging from Gallop to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute reveal a concerning degree of ignorance among the public.

Research indicates: 70 percent of Americans don't know what the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision meant; 51 percent don't know which country dropped a nuclear bomb on another country; 19 percent don't know what Martin Luther King Jr. accomplished; and 46 percent of college seniors don't know that the words "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..." are from the Declaration of

Independence. Be mindful of these facts when you consider that we have a critically important election approaching.

Fortunately, there are folks in our community who are working to reverse the decline in reading. On the Weber State University campus, Leah Murray and Scott Rogers have made sure that you

can't walk far without passing a newspaper rack with copies of the Standard-Examiner and The New York Times. My thanks go out to Ron Thornburg of the

Standard for his support of this effort.

Last year, Weber County started a program called Weber Reads, which is modeled after a Library of Congress project called "One Book, One Community." Through the efforts of Lynnnda Wangsgard, Kathryn MacKay and others, the Weber Reads program promotes reading and community conversations relating to the same book. The first book selected for the inaugural year of the Weber Reads program was "Beowulf," the oldest existing written work in the English language.

The program was a huge

success involving numerous community events: a read-a-thon where people were invited to take turns reading aloud from a common edition of "Beowulf," a storytelling event which delighted young readers with a children's version of "Beowulf," and a performance in the Ogden Amphitheater on a chilly winter evening.

In a few weeks, the Weber Reads program will announce the book selection for 2009. I won't reveal the name of the book selected for 2009, but I will say the book fits Mark Twain's definition of a classic work of literature: "A book which people praise and don't read."

There is evidence that these efforts are having some success. There is a rumor that more copies of "Beowulf" were sold in Ogden than San Francisco in the first months of 2008. The recently released 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement indicates that Weber State first-year students read more unassigned books than their counterparts at other universities across the nation. These are encouraging signs.

Increasing literacy in the Top of Utah is certainly a laudable endeavor, and thanks are due to those who are doing their small part.

Meet Russell Hutchins,
whose life was saved
by doctors, nurses,
and a protocol.